

XIII.—THE BREEDING OF THE INDIAN LESSER WHITETHROAT
(*SYLVIA CURRUCA AFFINIS*) AT QUETTA

With reference to 'Some notes on the second edition of the *Fauna of British India—Birds*, vols. i and ii' by Claud B. Ticehurst which appeared at page 497, vol. xxxi, No. 2 of the Journal, published on August 15, 1926, regarding the nesting of the Indian Lesser Whitethroat (*Sylvia curruca affinis*) at Quetta, I would like to make the following statement:—

About ten years after I had left Quetta, Dr. Ticehurst wrote asking me whether I was sure that this bird nested at Quetta. I told him I was not. At that time, I had not access to my notes, which I have at the time of writing this. On referring to them, I find that May 13, 1906, so far as finding birds new to me, was a red letter day. On that day, I found the nests of this bird, as will be explained later, the Eastern Orphean Warbler (*Sylvia hortensis crassirostris*) and the Rufous Shrike (*Lanius cristatus phoenicuroides*). I had not seen these birds before, so did not know what they were, consequently I had to do, what is always distasteful to me, shoot them off the nest. This I did and sent them to the museum for identification. They may have been wrongly identified. As the Shrike and Orphean Warbler have not been challenged, I do not see why the Lesser Whitethroat should be? I am afraid the reason why Dr. Ticehurst could not obtain information from the Museum was probably due to the fact of the skins being such bad specimens, were thrown away, not being worth preservation. The eggs, I took, were not marked till I received a reply telling me what they were. The following is an extract from my notes:—'13—5—1926. Nest in low thorn bush, 4 incubated eggs, nest flimsy.' I found another on May 31, with four half-fledged young, and seem to have found five or six Orphean Warblers.

The eggs are now in the possession of Mr. Stuart Baker, who should be well able to express an opinion as to whether they are the Indian Lesser Whitethroat, if not, what he considers them to be.

Quetta is a highway for migrating birds and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that a bird, here and there, may be compelled, by circumstances, to stop and nest before reaching its destination proper. The locality, in which the Whitethroats' and Warblers' nests were found, was on the hillsides bounding the Hanna Pass and not in the valley.

It is to be hoped that ornithologists who may happen to be quartered at Quetta now, or in the future, will keep an eye open for this bird.

CAPE TOWN,
October 30, 1926.

R. M. BETHAM,
Brigadier-General.

XIV.—THE EFFECTS OF A RECENT CYCLONIC STORM ON BIRD
LIFE IN KARACHI AND ITS ENVIRONS

The rainfall in Karachi for the past seventeen years works out to an average of 6.54 in. per annum. These figures however include abnormal falls of 9.28 in., 14.12 in., 8.08 in., 20.33 in., 12.63 in., and 15.54 in. during the years 1910, 1913, 1914, 1916, 1921 and 1926 respectively.

The actual rainfall in seven of these seventeen years has not gauged 3 in. per year, so when Karachi, situated as it is, was suddenly struck by the cyclone and deluged by a more or less continuous downpour, gauging 12.71 in. in so short a time as 38 hours, the results can be imagined.

On the evening of Saturday, September 4, rolling banks of dense clouds overshadowed the sky completely shutting out the sun, then came the wind and rain bringing desolation and destruction.

By Sunday afternoon roads and streets were muddy, sluggish waterways, dotted here and there with uprooted trees. Maidans and recreation grounds, sheets of water, and the Lyari (a dry river-bed) a rushing, swirling, ugly-looking torrent, scattered with floating debris, the washed-out homes, all the worldly possessions of many a Mekrani family; here or there, turned and twisted by the remorseless current, almost submerged but still distinguishable, the carcass of some unfortunate domestic beast, the bloated body of a rat or a mass of drenched, bedraggled feathers, a mere shape, all that remained of some hapless bird, alive so shortly before, realistic, grimly symbolic of the insatiable rage of the elements.

Monday dawned, the wind and rain had gone leaving a trail of havoc. Distress and disease, malaria, typhoid and dysentery, quickly followed taking toll from every street. Karachi is still suffering, doctors and undertakers profiting.

The cyclone came at a time when the house crows had still the responsibilities of feeding their hungry, helpless, half-fledged offspring, consequently, as a 'species', they suffered heavily.

Over a score of dead fledglings, apparently beaten out of their rain-and-wind-battered nests, were counted in the compound of the Civil Hospital alone and in two small public gardens within the limits of the city proper. Heaven alone knows how many had been washed away before the floods subsided, but it is significant that, about twenty days after the cyclone, only four young crows were found in the fields at Malir and Landhi, where in all about eighty birds were seen.

While the storm was at its worst a crow which attempted to fly from a date palm to a 'banyan' tree a short distance away, was beaten down by the rain. It managed however to flap and flounder its way out of the water and sought safety under a building stair-way. This bird which was fully grown was quite exhausted and incapable of flight.

The city house sparrows, like the kites and semi-domestic pigeons of the town, were able to find shelter in buildings, on cornices and under the eaves of roofs, thus escaping the violence of wind and rain. On the whole the kites and pigeons got off lightly, with just a severe drenching, the sparrows however suffered to some extent.

During a short lull on the evening of the second day a batch of pigeons ventured out to feed in the yard of a granary, but after circling around, flew off towards the city without attempting to alight on the sheet of water below, their transformed but regular feeding ground.

If the floods had not subsided as quickly as they did, it is probable that all species, habitants of the city and its environs, would have suffered more or less from starvation. It would then have been interesting to note if any of these species migrated temporarily elsewhere.

A pair of rose-ringed parroquets took shelter under the gable of our roof and a pair of house mynas jostled a pigeon for room under the eaves.

A flooded-out earth mole swam to a partly submerged *kutch*a wall, upon which it climbed, crawling feebly from end to end vainly seeking shelter and safety in some hidden recess.

Kites and the pigeons sat, in some instances, almost side by side for hours on sheltered cornices.

Human bodies and the carcasses of camel foals, cows and donkeys, washed down by the Lyari River, were fished out of the sea at Keamari. The story goes that some cows pulled out alive by Port Trust employees were milked shortly after landing, poor beasts.

On September 25, about twenty days after the cyclone, a searching visit was paid to the gardens and other wooded tracts at Malir and Landhi, thirteen and fifteen miles respectively from Karachi, where bird life abounds.

A 'babul' wood situated between these two places had apparently met the brunt of the storm. The position of uprooted trees clearly indicated the direction of the wind, which struck the wood from the west, moving in a semi-circle towards the south, leaving in its wake rows of torn and uprooted trees. Here alone, within a comparatively small radius, could be counted over a score of fallen trees.

This wood is the haunt of many drongos and several species of Shrike, but none of these birds appeared to be in less numbers than usually met with.

A small but dense belt of tamarisk scrub, near the Malir River, a favourite resort of common babblers and some warblers was entirely devoid of bird life.

Large mangoe, mulberry and guava topes, which usually contained great numbers of white-eared bulbuls and white-browed fantail flycatchers, were found practically empty of bird life, the two species named being conspicuous by their absence. In all, three of the former and only one of the latter were seen.

Extensive bean and egg-plant fields, the usual haunts of numerous tailor birds, were quite deserted. A quiet beat along the bushes, row by row, flushed a single bird which appeared weak and sickly.

These very fields once yielded no less than nine fresh nests in a short and casual search.

Irregular tracts of small 'babul' trees and borrow-pits along the railway lines, where doves, pin-tailed munias and bee-eaters were usually found in abundance, had been apparently quite submerged and very few of these birds were seen.

As a result of such observations, as were possible under the circumstances, it can with safety be said that as 'species' the smaller Warblers, White-eared Bulbuls and White-browed Fantail Flycatchers suffered the most, the Babblers to a less degree.

The heavy toll among crow fledglings was due more to circumstances, than to direct results of the cyclone, which came at an unfortunate time, when the young birds, exposed and helpless in open, unprotected nests were at the mercy of wind and torrential rain.

The shrikes and drongos being larger and constitutionally stronger than flycatchers and warblers apparently escaped scot free. Such is the insuperable Law of Nature, what the strong survive the weak succumb to.

Note.—Unfortunately, photographs taken during the cyclone proved failures, owing to the extremely bad light.

KARACHI, SIND.

K. R. EATES.

October, 1926.

[Mr. Culbertson writes from Karachi on September 13, that quail were arriving during the storm. A friend of his picked up a quail in his drawing room and put up another in his garden on Monday morning just after the storm had blown itself out. He appears to be of the opinion that much more damage was actually caused to animal life by the heavy rain and overflowing of nullahs, etc., than by the wind which did not reach beyond forty or forty-five miles per hour. Eds.]

XV.—STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF A TRUNCATED FLY

Some time ago, seeing a large fly, like a horse fly, sitting on a tumbler, I absent-mindedly took up a knife and, by a lucky hit, cut it at once in two in rear of the front legs. Instead of finishing the fly's earthly career it led to a most amazing performance on the part of the fly, which continued until I could stand it no longer and took further measures.

The two halves of the fly appeared perfectly well, vigorously chased each other about the table and indulged in several very severe fights. The hind part appeared to have intelligence as well as the front part and was quite equal to holding its own in the fights, having the advantage of weight on its side.

I do not know how long apparent life would have lasted but I watched the performance for about twenty minutes and then stopped it.

What is the explanation of both halves being able to carry on independently? I can understand the head-piece existing for a time but is there a separate mental organization in the body or is it merely very vigorous and continued reflex action?

ELGIN HALL,

DALHOUSIE.

July 20, 1926.

C. W. SANDERS,

Major.

[Commenting on the above Major R. W. G. Hingston writes as follows:—

'The nervous apparatus of a fly consists of a brain, a sub-oesophageal ganglion, and a ventral chain of ganglia along the floor of the thorax and abdomen. The brain is the central organ of sensation; but each ganglion of the ventral chain is capable of individual nervous control. It possesses both motor and sensory functions, is an independent reflex centre, exhibits a capacity for co-ordination with some degree of individual autonomy, and this co-ordination exists independently of that exercised by the brain.'